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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN SRI LANKA'S NORTHERN PROVINCE:
UPDATE AND THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

¶1. (U) Summary: As the Sri Lankan military makes headway into the Northern Province, UN Agencies and INGOs have been requested by the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) to pull back to Vavuniya as their safety and security cannot be guaranteed. As a result, the security and humanitarian situation for civilians has become precarious. The Ambassador, who already attends monthly Consultative Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (CCHA) meetings, will begin to attend weekly CCHA meetings to focus on the situation in the Vanni, the jungle area north of Vavuniya. Meanwhile, USAID is engaged in meetings with UN agencies, ICRC and INGO partners in Colombo but additional assistance will be needed from USAID and State to further assess the situation on the ground and to inform Post's decisions with regard to the best interventions for USG support. End Summary.

BACKGROUND: GSL STAGING FOR AN ASSAULT

¶2. (SBU) The conflict between the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has reached new heights in Sri Lanka's North, by all accounts, with mounting pressure in the Vanni region and the announcement by the GSL that the safety of agencies can no longer be guaranteed. According to UN sources, fierce fighting has been reported in several areas of the southeastern forward defense line in the Mullaitivu District and along the A32 Mannar-Pooneryn road in Kilinochchi, while an increasing number of air strikes and aerial bombardments also took place - resulting in more population movements further into the Vanni. The UN reports that the latest displacement took place out of Kilinochchi's Puthumurippu and surrounding Uttupulam and Konavil areas and along the coastal areas of Mullaitivu's Maritime Pattu division.

¶3. (SBU) Restrictions in movement are severely impeding the ability of UN agencies to gather information; however, it is estimated that more than 17,000 families (67,600 persons) have fled their homes in the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu Districts since military operations were stepped up at the end of June 2008. The UN reports that some internally displaced families are receiving some support in several divisions of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu Districts, while many others have been forced to move several times to escape ground battles and shelling along the shifting frontlines. According to GSL and UN estimates, with the recent movements, there are now more than 40,000 newly displaced families (160,000) in the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu

Districts since April 2006.

14. (SBU) As the hostilities close in on the LTTE heartland, and following recent statements by the GSL that the safety of humanitarian workers can no longer be guaranteed, UN agencies are now relocating out of the Vanni. Last week, shells landed approximately one kilometer from the World Food Program (WFP) compound. As a result, all UN/INGO movements from Omanthai into the Vanni were halted following a GSL directive. Subsequently a curfew was imposed while UN movements out of Kilinochchi city were also restricted. The relocation process is set to be complete by September 20, 2008, after which possibly only two local UN senior staff will remain in Kilinochchi as liaison officers.

IMPEDIMENTS TO DELIVERY OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

15. (SBU) UN agencies and their NGO and INGO partners were notified on September 8 that they had until September 17 to evacuate the Vanni, as the GSL could no longer ensure their safety. The UN agencies are working on a personnel and equipment draw down which has all staff leaving by September 17, except for the two liaison officers and the heads of offices, who would remain until September 20 to support national staff who are unable to leave. These dates are subject to change as there have been some difficulties for the UN with the move. People in the area have been protesting and holding up the convoys in Kilinochchi city. Thus far, the UN has been unsuccessful in negotiating safe passage out of the Vanni from the LTTE for their national staff and dependents who are from the Vanni. The UN's position is that all of their staff, international and local, should be treated as international representatives of the

UN. The LTTE has instituted a pass system whereby Vanni residents need to receive a pass to leave LTTE controlled areas. Receipt of the pass is dependent upon the individual leaving with the LTTE the name of a resident family member who would guarantee that individual's return. The UN local staff who have not received passes either do not want to leave the name of a family member with the LTTE or they are not willing to leave behind family at all. While some local UN staff resident in the Vanni have left through this pass system, UNOCHA stated that there remain fewer than 30 staff with 80 dependents. If they are still unable to depart the Vanni by September 17, those staff will be given a letter on UN letterhead stating they are UN staff and should be guaranteed safe passage out of the Vanni. The Ambassador and the USAID Mission Director met with the GSL on September 12 to discuss the situation and to work together to ensure the IDPs who are unable to move from the area will continue to receive food, shelter and support. There are currently approximately 160,000 IDPs in the Kilinochchi area who are unable to move freely to a safer area.

16. (SBU) WFP operating in the Vanni has food stores and supplies that will be left behind during the evacuation. The current plan is for the GSL Government Agent (GA) in the Vanni to take over the stocks and continue to disburse the supplies to the internally displaced persons (IDPs). The GSL stated that it is capable of delivering and monitoring this assistance because he had done so in the East (note: it was mainly UN agencies, and their partner INGOs, and the ICRC who delivered the assistance to the East). While the WFP has commodities both from USAID's Food for Peace Program (FFP), as well as from other donors, 80 percent of the rice needed is purchased on the local market in the Vanni. UN Agencies, however, report that an estimated thirty percent of the rice-producing areas in the Vanni are no longer accessible as a result of the conflict.

17. (SBU) The ICRC will continue working in the Vanni from either Kilinochchi or Puthukkudiyiruppu (PTK), with the approval of the GSL. The ICRC may be forced to leave Kilinochchi for its own safety; however, the ICRC is still discussing this with the GSL. Currently, the Red Cross is operational in Kilinochchi, PTK, Omanthai and Vavuniya. The ICRC checks with both the GSL and LTTE daily on movements to ensure its employees safety. World Vision is currently still providing water to 3,000 IDPs in Kilinochchi within a 4 kilometer radius of the city. World Vision is unsure how long supplies will last and whether it will continue to stay in the Kilinochchi area for as long as possible -- in spite of GSL requests

to the contrary.

¶8. (SBU) Protection of IDPs: UNHCR reports that it is deeply concerned about the safety of the general population, including the many displaced families in the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu Districts.

UNHCR is urging both the GSL and the LTTE to take every possible measure to safeguard and provide them with safe passage out of the Vanni. UNHCR reports that restrictions continue on the transportation of humanitarian supplies into the Vanni. Further restrictions, particularly on shelter materials, are expected in light of the GSL's concerns regarding LTTE appropriation of materials and the GSL's plans to evacuate the civilian population. UNHCR continues to advocate with the GSL to ease restrictions on the transportation of humanitarian materials to the Vanni.

¶9. (SBU) UNHCR reports that IDPs moving into the Kilinochchi District are living in schools and other public buildings. Many buildings are full and a large number of families are living in the open under trees. Displacement is causing financial strain on many families with reports of families selling assistance to pay for transport to safer places. The Ambassador and USAID Mission Director met with President Rajapaksa's senior advisor, Basil Rajapaksa, on September 12 to discuss USG concerns over the plight of the IDPs and to deliver the news that unless the WFP is able to monitor the commodities from FFP, future U.S. shipments of commodities for the Vanni are in jeopardy.

USG COUNTRY TEAM SCENARIO PLANNING

¶10. (SBU) Post (including State, USAID and DOD representatives) is developing a three-phase plan of possible USG-supported interventions and resources to address the plight of the IDPs in the Vanni in the short-, medium- and long-term. Phase 1 (short-term) is for immediate emergency relief intervention. Some current resources are identified at Post, but additional resources will be needed from other USG sources. Post continues to stay in constant contact with other donors, UN agencies, ICRC, and INGOs to coordinate resources and to share information. Depending on how the fighting in the Vanni develops, phase 1 could take place over the next 6 to 8 months. Post's desktop review of phase 1 needs, which need to be reviewed by OFDA, FFP, and State/PRM, include: a review of the food stocks and future needs for the Vanni under various planning scenarios, demining funding, cash for work programs and additional support to the UN Common Humanitarian Assistance Program (UNCHAP) for water and sanitation, protection, psychosocial services, and temporary shelter.

¶11. Phases 2 and 3 address stabilization (e.g., protection, livelihoods - especially for women headed households, disarmament/demobilization/reintegration, civilian-military relations, health and education services, small scale infrastructure, among other areas) and sustainable development (e.g., long term agriculture growth, private sector investment, infrastructure, reintegration, local government technical assistance, among other areas), respectively. Post will also pursue assistance for those resources once phase 1 is underway. There is expected to be some overlap in the phases, as we have witnessed in the East, with water and sanitation, livelihoods (especially for households headed by women) and protection work still needed.

ACTION REQUESTED

¶12. (SBU) Post requests that USAID/OFDA, USAID/FFP, and State/PRM review their resources to identify potential funds to continue to support the ICRC, UNCHAP, and the USAID umbrella grant mechanism, in phases 1 and 2. Post thanks USAID/OFDA for providing on the ground support to assist country team with the scenario planning, to maintain regular contact with UN/ICRC and INGO agencies in the affected areas and in Colombo, and to identify further needs requiring USG support during phase 1.

BLAKE